# MSF-OCBA

# EMERGENCY RESPONSE CAPACITY REVIEW

# 2014-2016

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COVER PICTURE: MSF Media Data Base, photo by Anna Surinyach, Malakal, 2015.

# ACRONYMS

| | |
|---|---|
| CMT | Country Management Team |
| EU | Emergency Unit |
| FTE | Full Time Equivalent |
| HART | Humanitarian Advocacy and Representation Team |
| HIC | Highly Insecure Context |
| MERT | Mission Emergency Response Unit |
| OC | Operational Centre |
| OCBA | Operational Centre Barcelona Athens |
| OCT | Operations Core Team |
| SP | Strategic Plan |

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Based on the analysis of a widening gap between humanitarian needs and the aid sector's response in complex emergencies, MSF-OCBA has placed its operational focus on interventions in armed conflict and emergencies. A comprehensive advocacy initiative – The Emergency Gap Project – has accompanied and supported the operational effort.

Having met its operational Strategic Plan ambitions, OCBA commissioned a review of its emergency response and support capacity with the aim to identify the enabling and disabling factors. The findings are intended to inform internal debates about future strategic choices, as well as to support OCBA's dialogue with external actors on the topic of emergency response.

The review provides a macro perspective of OCBA's major emergency interventions between 2014 and 2016, as well as the Mission Emergency Response Units. It also examined the organizational support to emergency response, and identified areas that OCBA may consider as strategic priorities to further improve its emergency response capacity. The scope of the review – numerous complex emergency interventions and organizational support over a period of three years – did not allow for in-depth research. Findings and conclusions are based on interviews with staff from relevant departments and levels of the organization, supported by the analysis of available operational data.

Between 2014 and 2016, OCBA's interventions in armed conflict and emergencies have grown proportionally (compared to interventions in other context), as well as in absolute terms, as the operational portfolio saw significantly growth overall. OCBA's presence - with considerable scale - in most of the major humanitarian emergencies is a remarkable achievement.

Several factors were identified as enabling the organization to implement its ambition. Key among them was strong and cohesive leadership in articulating and promoting the vision, institutional willingness to accept security and operational risk, and decisiveness in implementation of the vision. In addition, a culture of trust and delegated responsibility, especially towards and within the Emergency Unit, has helped to enable staff to take initiative and risk. OCBA should ensure that this value, and that of an emergency mind-set, is cultivated within the organization.

On operational level, the establishment of emergency team units in missions in volatile and emergency-prone contexts has enabled the Emergency Unit to concentrate its efforts on the major complex emergency contexts. In assertive states, they also function as access-enablers.

Organizational support capacity has been stretched by the overall operational growth, combined with the changing support requirements generated by the operational choices. Adaptations to meet these support demands have largely been made, and have led to improvements of the support provided by the Service Departments to emergency interventions. A wide range of technical and operational aspects in need of improvement have been identified, both concerning implementation and as well as support. Joint prioritization and better inter-departmental coordination is necessary to optimize tackling these challenges.

The most pressing and biggest challenge to OCBA's emergency response capacity is the shortage of experienced emergency coordinators. The HR department and the Emergency Unit have launched various initiatives to mitigate the supply gap. To effectively address this challenge, it should become a strategic organizational priority. Joint responsibility and coordination, in particular between the HR Department and Operations, is of critical importance to identify, develop, and retain staff capable of managing emergency interventions in complex contexts.

Other topics that warrant consideration as strategic priorities include structural and process issues. The structural topic relates mainly to the question whether the EU (Emergency Unit) requires different capacities, authority, and responsibilities to most effectively improve organizational emergency response and support capacity. In addition, a review the effectiveness of the OCT (Operations Core Team) and Core MT (Management Team) may provide opportunities to enhance strategic steering.

With regard to processes, OCBA has invested in the development of organizational emergency processes to enable timely and effective emergency response, in particular in Operations, HR, Finance, and Supply. As result of the operational policy and increasing bureaucratic hurdles in many countries of operations, a growing proportion of interventions face short planning horizons, and require tailor-made support and solutions. The implications of these developments warrant further analysis: not only of whether the 'regular' process should remain the default modus operandi, but also how to balance the drive for standardization with the need for tailor-made support needs and solutions.

OCBA has made great strides in the implementation of its vision to assist those at the heart of armed conflict and humanitarian emergencies. The choice to continue to focus on conflict and emergencies, and improve the relevance of its assistance, will necessitate setting, and steering on, clear strategic priorities that aim to enhance the organization's emergency response capacity.

# INTRODUCTION

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

In its Strategic Plan 2014-17, OCBA committed to focus the majority of its operations to armed conflict and emergencies. Steering indicators for operational expenditure dedicated to protracted conflict, acute conflict, and emergency response, have been met. Whilst OCBA has reached these strategic plan objectives in terms of operational spending, the heightened focus on challenging contexts and emergencies has also required the adjustment of all Service Departments.

Through this review, MSF-OCBA intended to examine the factors that have enabled the organization to meet its emergency objectives, as well as to identify the areas that require improvement related to emergency response. The findings are meant to inform both internal OCBA strategic discussions as well as to stimulate debate within MSF regarding broader ambitions and challenges for emergency response.

## EVALUATION SCOPE

This review was initially conceived as an evaluation of OCBA's emergency response over the past years. The rationale for the evaluation was grounded in OCBA's Emergency Gap Series: OCBA's critique of the aid sector's failure to adequately respond to major emergencies triggered the idea to critically examine OCBA's own emergency response capacities – the enablers as well as the weaknesses – and share the findings externally as part of the Emergency Gap Project.

After an initial phase of data compilation and interviews with key stakeholders, it became apparent that the in-depth research and time required to answer the questions posed in the ToR with sound, assertive judgments, far exceeded the evaluation team's capacity and time frame allocated for the project. The broad scope of the project made it unfeasible to conduct an in-depth, rigorous and methodologically sound evaluation.

It was therefore agreed to frame the project as a (strategic level) review, and – given the lack of rigorous methodology – to refrain from publishing the report externally. Instead, specific findings of the report are incorporated in the final Emergency Gap Report.

In addition, senior management requested the project to be more forward-looking and focus on the identification of strategic topics critical to further enhance the organization's emergency response capacity.

The Terms of Reference was adapted accordingly.

The time period under review is 2014-16, the first three years of the current Strategic Plan.

Intersectional dynamics often are a significant factor impacting a section's emergency response in a particular context. Whilst taken into account in the review, these dynamics were not specifically examined.

See inception report for further details.

## METHODOLOGY

The report is based on interviews, document review, and data analysis. 38 semi-structured interviews were carried out with:

- 30 HQ staff (BCN, Amman, NBO)
- 4 OCBA field staff
- Head of Emergency Team from 2 other OC's
- 2 HART members

In addition, 44 documents were reviewed, and relevant operational data compiled and analysed. The findings and conclusions were presented in a session with the OCBA Management Team and other key informants.

Due to the limitations of scope, the review and appraisal of OCBA's EU-led emergency interventions and the Mission Emergency Response Units (MERT) is not fully comprehensive. This is less limiting in the case of the MERTs, as almost

all staff interviewed about MERTs provided similar answers. The consistency of the feedback thus allowed the identification of generic issues with relatively high confidence.

This was different in the cases of the EU-led interventions. One limitation was that only few of the many staff who were implementing, managing, or advising these interventions were interviewed. The other limitation was, that even among the few, opinions often differed, in particular regarding timeliness and appropriate scale. In addition, as staff were involved at different phases of these, often long-lasting interventions, they likely had different reference points and baselines (on which they based their opinions). The appraisal of the interventions in the table is therefore rudimentary – let alone the fact that the tick-boxes in themselves are a profoundly crude method of appraisal, even when based on thorough analysis. It is meant to provide a gist of what a quite superficial review revealed.


## LIMITATIONS

Reviews entail the risk of over-generalization, and over-looking important nuances. The attempt was made to mitigate this risk by consulting a large group of informants, and refraining from making absolute judgments.

Data availability on MERTs in regular mission proved too difficult to compile as little data is collected centrally. No standard reporting format exists for data such as number of alerts-, assessments-, interventions-, missed opportunities, etc. The reporting on MERT activities that is done in the annual mission reports does not allow for easy retrieval and comparison.

Survivor bias – the notion that those who disagreed with the Strategic Plan (SP) direction have left the organization, leaving only believers behind – is unlikely to be a significant factor, as the review did not address the relevance of the SP choice, but rather its implementation.
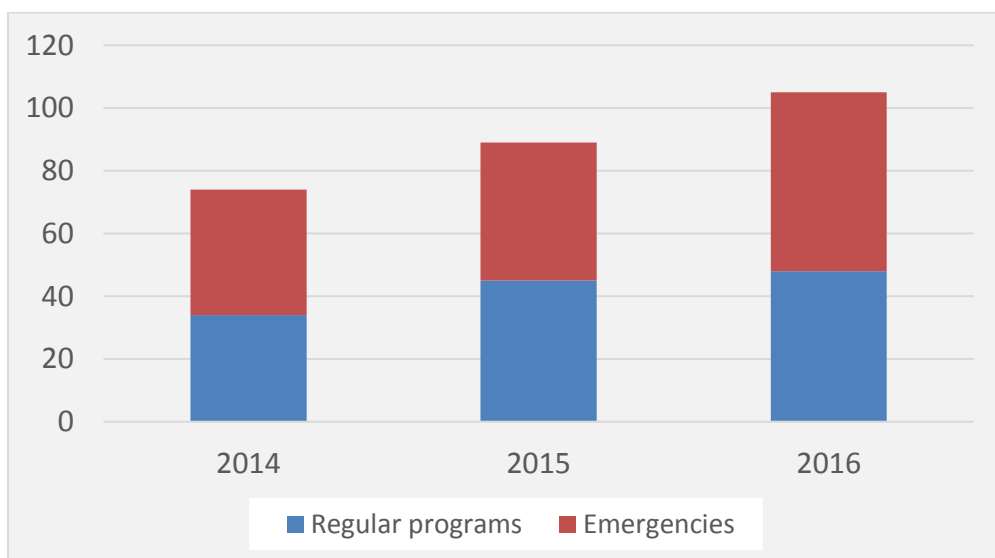
# FINDINGS

## OPERATIONAL TRENDS

A review OCBA's emergency response cannot be done in isolation but needs to consider the context of OCBA's overall operational developments.
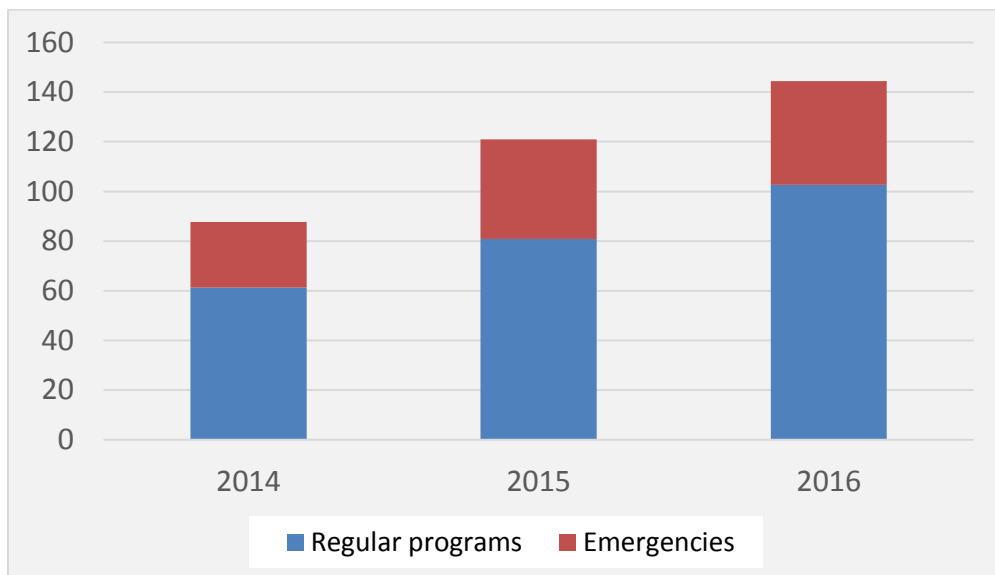
The period 2014 - 2016 was marked by substantial operational growth.

Graph 1: Number of interventions



Between 2014 and 2016, the number of emergency interventions increased by 43%, and the financial expenditures for emergencies by 58% (vs 41% and 64% overall operational growth respectively).

Graph 2: Operational Expenditure

Graph 3 illustrates the increasing contextual complexity and risk exposure of OCBA's interventions. Expenditure in Highly Insecure Contexts (HIC)[1] increased from 22.8% of the total operational expenditure in 2014 (€20mio) to 36.8% in 2016 (€55.7mio).

In the same period, the percentage of interventions increased from 27% (20) to 29.5% (37), and the percentage of international Full Time Equivalent (FTE) in HICs from 22.2% (88 FTE) to 28.5% (152 FTE).

Graph 3: Operational growth in highly insecure contexts (HIC)
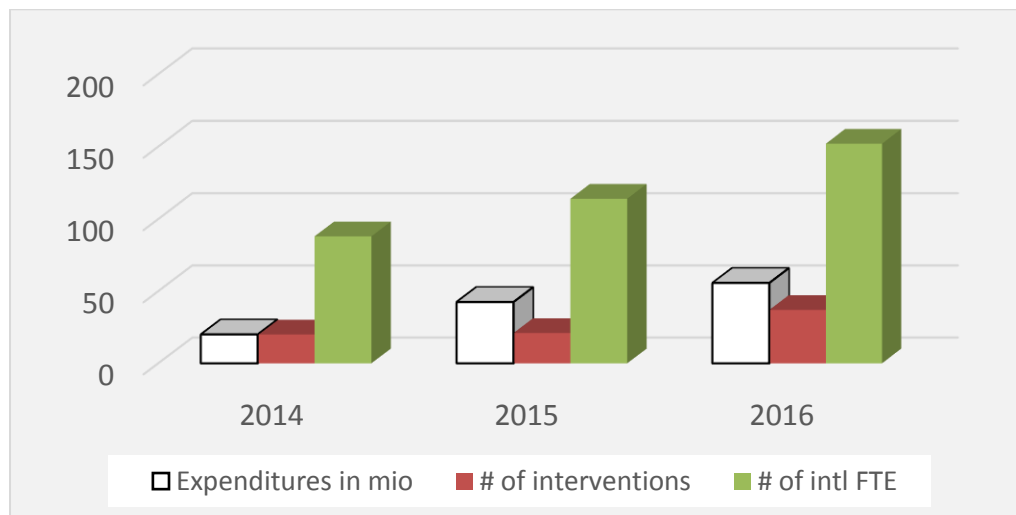


### The enablers

This shift of operational focus was enabled by several, in part inter-related, factors:

- Cohesion and clarity of vision among the core group of senior executive and associative leadership
- The ability and persistence by the core group to promote, explain, and defend its vision in OCBA and the MSF movement
- A readiness for change in the organization, and a relatively easy message to sell (MSF being an emergency response organization)
- The willingness to follow through on strategic choices with difficult decisions (project closures, replacement of staff in key functions)
- An explicit institutional willingness to accept the security risks implied by the operational choices.
- The promotion of a culture of trust and delegated responsibility ('freedom to fail') by senior operational line management, in particular towards the Emergency Unit (EU)
- The availability of (financial) resources in this time period that allowed for expansion of the operational portfolio, including emergencies

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[1] OCBA classifies the following contexts as HIC: Ethiopia-Liben, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Syria, Yemen

## Security

OCBA's operational focus on armed conflict, coupled with overall operational growth, has increased its risk exposure. Results from the interviews and data analysis (2016 MSF International End of Mission Survey and Annual Security Reports) do not indicate any red flags with regard to overall security management capacity. The Security Core Group is considered an added value to OCBA's security risk management.

Considering the number of international FTE's in highly insecure contexts, OCBA's exposure in these settings is high compared to most other OC's. The increase in absolute numbers of intl. FTE's in HICs from 88 in 2014 to 152 in 2016 is also significant.

This trend will need to be managed carefully in light of widely raised concerns by those interviewed for this review about the challenge to identify sufficiently experienced and skilled staff for coordination positions in challenging contexts.

The increase in operational volume was mainly driven by OCBA interventions in major humanitarian crises in CAR (as of 2013), Ebola in West Africa (2014), Niger (2014), South Sudan (as of 2014), Yemen (as of 2015), and Nigeria (as of 2016).

Graph 4: Medical output (IPD, surgery, deliveries)
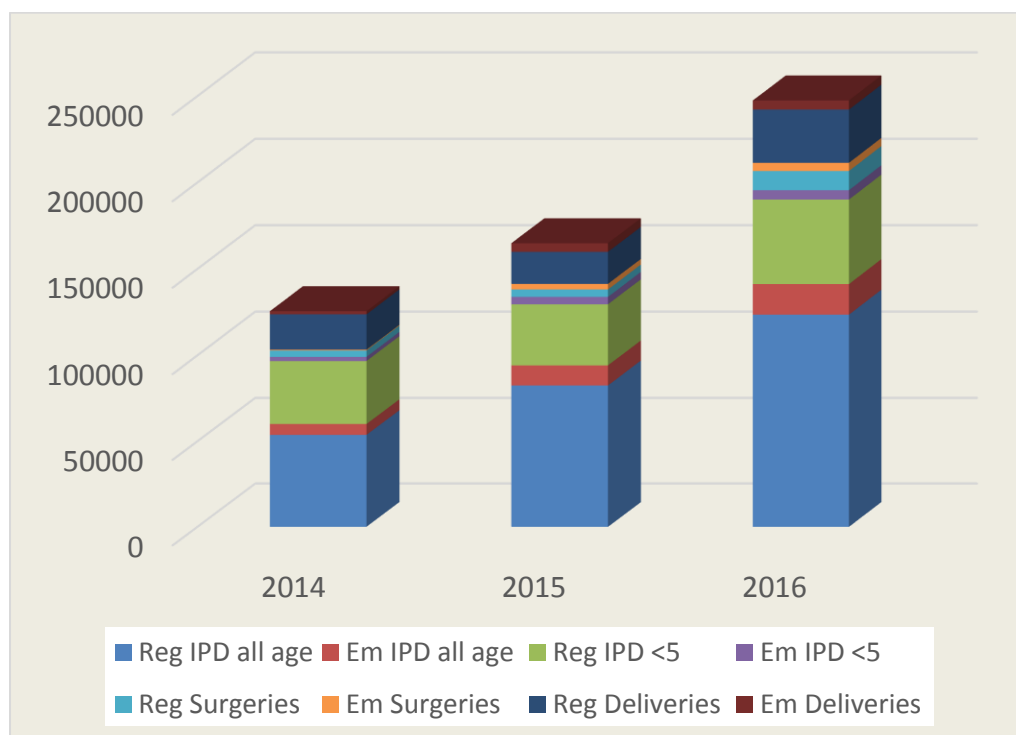


The growth is also clearly reflected in the medical output. IPD admissions increased from 60,060 in 2014 to 141,207 in 2016. The number of surgeries performed rose from 4,141 to 15,802 in the same period. Deliveries were up 62% from 22,261 to 36,106.

## EMERGENCY RESPONSE INTERVENTIONS

The aim of reviewing EU-led interventions and Mission Emergency Response Teams (MERT) was to identify transversal issues, and provide a broad perspective of OCBA's emergency response over the past three years.

## Emergency Unit

### *EU-led interventions*

Seven EU-led interventions were examined against the benchmarks of presence in the right places, the timeliness of the response, operational choices to address critical needs, and (appropriate) scale[2].

Reflections of staff involved in the management or implementation of the interventions, typology data, and in part the reviewer's perspectives[3] were used to make approximate 'appraisals'. Four important caveats to mention are:

- Only a few of the staff involved in implementing, managing, and supporting these, often long-lasting-interventions were interviewed
- in particular in emergency settings, individuals often have different levels of information, decision-making is rapid, and documentation often sub-optimal. As a result, opinions and memories may differ regarding events, decisions, and their rationale. The review did not allow for much cross-checking and verification of important details.
- The appraisal did not measure quality and impact of the interventions.
- A data comparison with other OC's was carried out, but is of limited value as intervention periods, and operational models differ.

| CONTEXT | RIGHT PLACES | TIMELY | CRITICAL NEEDS | SCALEE |
|---------|--------------|--------|----------------|--------|
| A | ? | X | ? | X |
| B | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| C | ✓ | X | ✓ | ? |
| D | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ - | ✓ - |
| E | ✓ | X | X | X |
| F | ✓ | ✓ - | ✓ | ✓ |
| G | ✓ | ✓ - | ✓ | ✓ |

The caveats clearly imply that this table has limited value in terms of drawing assertive conclusions. However, it does provide a gist that:

- Generally: with exceptions, OCBA's emergency response in major crises appears to have been reasonably satisfactory.
- Right places: In these contexts, OCBA by and large identified, and gained access to, relevant locations within a crisis context.
- Timeliness: The cases of (relatively) late interventions are a result of either the reliance on the analysis and advice from other OC already present in the context (to not intervene), or missed opportunities where pre-positioning might have been appropriate. A good example of the pertinence of sound contextual analysis and strategic positioning is reflected in OCBA's choice to invest in access to Aleppo long before the frontlines reached the city, enabling a timely emergency response when it was needed.
- Critical needs: According to international typology data, OCBA's emergency interventions have been relatively comprehensive and integrated in comparison with the interventions of other OC's. Some within OCBA have raised concerns whether the approach is too integrated, as program complexity and size may hamper agility and responsiveness.
- Scale: The scale of the EU-led interventions (budgets, FTEs, medical output) is similar to that of most other OC's.

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[2] Right places were defined as the locations with the highest level of humanitarian need; Timeliness was based on the beginning of large-scale needs, as well as the start of interventions by other OC's; Operational choices to address critical needs was defined as whether OCBA addressed the most pressing needs in terms of mortality and morbidity; Coverage refers to whether OCBA's response was proportional to the scale of needs.

[3] The reviewer was involved in the emergency response of another OC in Yemen and South Sudan, that included discussions regarding coordination of OC interventions

In addition, it is worth highlighting that the Emergency Gap – the lack of (timely) presence of other actors in the first phases of humanitarian emergencies – was a prominent factor in almost all contexts.

OCBA has not intervened in Libya. The decision against opening a mission was taken based on the analysis that OCBA did not have sufficient staff capacity available to safely operate in such complex context (the staff with these competencies were assigned to other highly complex interventions).

*Advocacy*

The review did not address the topic of advocacy in detail. However, a few observations can be made:

The explicit SP ambition of having written position papers and advocacy strategies in place early in major emergencies is showing some effect: Adherence to this objective is good, and, according to informants from the Humanitarian Advocacy and Representation Team (HART) and other OC's, in comparison to other OCs, OCBA appears to be swift in terms of proposing advocacy initiatives (if sometimes considered too emotional and hasty by some). The EU is also regarded as open and collaborative on matters concerning advocacy and public communications. The review did not examine the extent to which advocacy strategies are implemented.

OCBA has ensured systematic follow-up on attacks on medical facilities. In particular the advocacy after the attack on Abs hospital showed tangible results in improved engagement with Saudi Arabia.

Some raised the concern that key advocacy initiatives are too HQ-driven. Increasing field ownership for advocacy has already been identified as a goal for the coming year.

*Challenges for the EU*

The notion exists that the choice to encourage and empower regular missions to take greater responsibility for emergency response in their contexts, has impacted on the EU in two ways:

First, it has enabled the EU to focus on the major humanitarian crises – which is broadly regarded as a positive development.

Second, there is the sense that it has resulted in a 'loss of monopoly' of the EU regarding emergency response, which contributed to the recruitment and retention challenges for the EU pool. In particular, experienced emergency coordinators are in short supply[4].

Another dominant discourse among those interviewed, is that today, the EU manages bigger, more complex, and less fast-paced[5] interventions for longer periods of time, whereas the majority of past interventions are perceived to have been shorter, less complex, and perhaps more satisfying and thus more attractive for international staff.

The data on the length of EU-led interventions is not entirely conclusive, even though the overall trend indicates a gradual increase.

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[4] The problem has long been identified, and various measures to address the issue are planned/in motion
[5] Less fast-paced may relate to the context (red tape) or to program choices and complexity. The example was given that the decision to use hospital containers instead of tents is more far-reaching and requires additional analysis, consultation, specialist input, and therefore time.

*Place of EU in the organization*

Whilst enjoying various privileges in terms of access to resources and management processes, the EU essentially remains a desk. Assuming OCBA chooses to further invest in, and make emergency response its trademark expertise, the organization may wish to consider whether the centrality of the EU as the main vehicle for the main organizational and operational priority – emergency response – is adequately reflected in its place in the organization.

In other words, the question to examine is: In order to most effectively improve emergency response capacity, what capacities, authority, and responsibilities does the EU require?

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**Definition of Emergency?**

It may be of use to clarify the term *emergency.* Currently, the term is used to describe both a context as well as a management mode. A more precise definition of the term would help to avoid the risk of confusion. If the term is defined as a management methodology only, it would reflect the reality that some – EU-led or otherwise – non-emergency contexts may be managed in emergency mode (e.g. new HIC contexts that demand daily and tight supervision by HQ). Conversely, contexts considered as emergencies by the aid world may be managed in the regular management mode (Yemen as an example).

Whatever definition is chosen, leaving it open to describe a management model as well as a context may on occasion cause confusion.

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## MERTS – Emergency response in regular missions

NB: For reasons of scope, the review only examined emergency response in regular missions with MERTs.

A total of six MERTs have been established (CAR, DRC, Ethiopia, Mali, Niger, Sudan). There is little easily accessible data at HQ level that would allow comparison between the MERTs in terms of effectiveness. However, interviews conducted with staff managing, supporting, and advising missions with MERTs, revealed an almost anonymous consensus on two issues:

- **Key factors for successful and effective MERTs: staffing and mission mindset**. Having emergency-experienced coordination staff heading the MERTs and in the CMT is seen as fundamental for a well-functioning MERT. Of equal importance is to have experience and relevant skill-sets in the core team (often national staff). Second, placing emergency response at the core of a mission's operational policy, and creating and promoting an emergency mindset in the mission, is considered vital. Progress has been made in this respect, as Country Management Teams are increasingly buying into the concept, and are re-focusing their operational priorities towards emergency response, and violence and conflict.
- **Emergency response in regular missions (with MERTs): improving, but work in progress**. Whilst MERT functioning and interventions are considered to be overall improving, many aspects of emergency response in regular missions require attention: increasing emergency experience in line management and on desk level; networking, surveillance, analysis, and access; tools and structures (training, data collection and reporting, management procedures); and encouraging MERTs to assess and intervene in contexts beyond their comfort zone (e.g. switching from a focus on outbreaks to a focus on armed conflict and displacement).

Many interviewees also raised concern about the impact of MERTs on the ability of the EU to attract staff. Whilst MERTs have freed the EU to focus on the major humanitarian crises, concerns are raised that they pose competition to the EU with regards to staff recruitment. Staff now have the option to work in emergencies without the commitments that come with joining the Emergency Pool[6].

One of the objectives of establishing MERTs in key missions was to facilitate access (geographical and bureaucratic) in assertive states (Ethiopia, Sudan). New ways of engagement (e.g. embedding in / partnering with MoH) are tested, and it appears that the strategy is bearing fruit. The case of Sudan has shown that these approaches require adequate staffing and management support to succeed. For organizational learning, it may be useful to ensure systematic documentation of the successes, lessons learnt, and the compromises accepted of these MERTs.

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[6] The May 2017 survey on the OCBA Emergency Pool addresses this question in detail.

The concept of MERTs has been accepted and adapted. Besides the technical improvements identified, various areas require reflection and organizational steering:

- In protracted conflicts, what is MSF's role beyond responding to individual emergencies? (i.e. in advocacy, positioning, and programming)
- Is the scope of the individual MERTs clearly defined? (Scope of emergency preparedness, capacity and size, intervention criteria)
- In order to justify (the rising) structural costs of MERTs, are missions tempted to intervene beyond their intervention criteria?
- Are structural and intervention costs in balance?
- What tools (training, information management, procedures) are required to enable effective interventions and monitoring of MERT performance?

It may also be interesting to compare the MERTs to Emergency Units of other OC's, in particular in the same countries (e.g. DRC).

## ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

The main question the review examined was the extent to which HQ was geared to support emergency response interventions. The two main findings are:

**Institutional support to emergency response is improving**. Operations was able to rapidly adapt to the directions articulated in the Strategic Plan. For good reason, it took most Service Departments more time to adjust, reprioritize, and re-allocate resources to meet support demands and requirements from operations. Much of the initial frustration this gap had created, appears to have been overcome though, and there is broad consensus that organizational support to emergency response is tangibly improving.

**Availability of experienced coordinators remains the main bottleneck to emergency response ambitions**. Availability of experienced coordinators is not a new challenge created by the emergency response ambitions. However, it appears that the overall operational growth, combined with the growth in emergency response may have exacerbated the tension between operational ambitions and resource availability. To successfully address the human resource challenge, it is imperative to tackle it in a holistic manner, and as an organizational priority, rather than tasking only the HR Department with finding solutions.

### Organizational culture

The question was raised whether an emergency mind-set – initiative, taking responsibility, decisiveness, commitment, can-do attitude – is sufficiently promoted and prevalent in HQ. This was in part triggered by the E-Gap analysis that concluded that the absence of an emergency mind-set is one of the main factors contributing to the lack of emergency response capacity in the wider sector.

This review does not offer an answer to the question – some believe that the emergency drive and initiative rests on too few shoulders, others state that support capacity available for emergency response is underutilized. Promoting this debate internally however – what can we do as a team/department/office to improve and foster such mind-set? – can only be beneficial to further OCBA's emergency response capacity ambitions.

Broadly related to the issue of mind-set is the culture of trust and delegated responsibility that senior operational leadership promoted, in particular towards, and within, the Emergency Unit. Staff feel confident and supported to take initiative and risk. The value of this culture of promoting decisiveness and individual responsibility (with institutional back-up) can hardly be overstated. It should be considered as a critical enabler of emergency responsiveness, and therefore safeguarded and nurtured.

## Human Resources

Several promising strategies to improve diversification, retention, staff development, and Emergency Pool recruitment have been initiated. Pay-off is gradual, but unable to meet the immediate and increasing demand generated by Operations for coordinators with the experience and skills to negotiate access and programming space in complex contexts.

Inflow of First Mission international staff has hovered around 20% for the past years. It is beyond the scope of this review whether this constitutes a concern for the HR pyramid in the medium and long-term.

To successfully tackle the human resource challenge, it is vital that the responsibility and response is an organizational one, led and steered by senior management. The HR Department obviously plays a central role in the effort, but other departments, in particular Operations are also instrumental if identified strategies are to be successful. The HR Department has the responsibility to recruit, place, provide tools, policies, processes, etc, but their implementation – coaching, evaluation, talent-spotting, etc – as well as developing HR demand projections, is dependent on, and carried out by, Operations and in part the other Support Departments.

Two other, inter-related issues were raised by interviewees: First, the question of the impact of increased specialization on the pool of generalists out of which future coordinators and directors are most likely to emerge. Second, the question whether humanitarian commitment and mind-set are sufficiently prioritized in recruitment as technical expertise requirements continue to increase. If this discussion is opened, it will have to be held within the wider context of operational outlook, as it is inextricably linked to that of quality ambitions, in particular in the medical domain.

## Governance aspects

The functioning of the Emergency Committee is highly appreciated. It is largely considered adequately inclusive, decisive, and transparent. Compromises in terms of information sharing are accepted for the benefit of rapid decision-making.

Some questions are raised about the effectiveness of the Operations Core Team (OCT). Purpose of the OCT and expectations of the platform and its members may be worth reviewing and clarifying as appropriate.

Some interviewees raised a lack of information-sharing and coordination between Service Departments as an issue of attention. Sharing and alignment of annual plans for example appears to be sub-optimal.

The review did not examine the effectiveness of the Core MT, but it is noticeable that no meetings took place in 2016, and only 2 in the first half of 2017. Three years into the implementation of the new governance reform, this may be an opportune moment to conduct a review and optimize governance processes and structures as considered necessary.

## Standards and Exceptions

OCBA's field operations are governed by two sets of processes and standards. The 'normal' processes and standards, applicable for regular interventions, and the 'emergency' processes and standards that allow faster response and more flexibility whilst ensuring minimum levels of quality and accountability. The distinction of the two sets of rules is most formalized for operational decision-making, HR placement, financial procedures, and supply processes.

As a result of OCBA's operational policy, the proportion of interventions in volatile and unpredictable contexts with short planning horizons is considerable, and may further increase. In addition, complex and challenging operational contexts – whether in assertive states or highly insecure contexts – increasingly demand tailor-made support processes and solutions. These developments raise questions the organization may wish to further explore: Will or should emergency support processes replace the regular processes as the 'default' process? If so, what are the implications for Service Departments? Beyond these two sets of processes, how should the organization respond to the increasing need for tailor-made support demands and local solutions?

## WAY(S) FORWARD

Interviewees gave a strikingly wide range of answers to the question: 'What are the main challenges and priorities to improve OCBA's emergency response capacity?'. Almost every single aspect of MSF field operations was mentioned, many related to quality-improvement. Human resource availability was the only domain that was consistently listed as a key challenge.



### Tactical Level

This array of priority challenges may simply signify the need and space for improvement in many areas. Against the backdrop of significant operational growth, growing engagement in complex environments, and increasingly complex programming, the sense that quality is a concern should not come as a surprise, as expertise and resources are stretched. In addition, it is in MSF's DNA to continuously push for improving the relevance of its assistance.

However, the diversity of opinion could perhaps also, at least in part, be explained by a predominantly function-based analysis of OCBA's main challenges. To an extent, it is entirely natural and appropriate that staff prioritize challenges through the lens of their area of responsibility and expertise. Yet, given that a large percentage of interviewees occupy middle or senior management positions, it may be relevant to explore whether this diversity of views could be indicative of a need for a more holistic analysis.

Many of the challenges listed are long-identified and already being tackled. Improved cross-departmental prioritization of, and coordination on, the technical and operational challenges will contribute to streamlining, and help avoid falling into the trap of not prioritizing anything by prioritizing everything.

### Organizational Level

At organizational level, OCBA has completed the first 'phase' in its endeavour to advance its emergency response capacity, and should ready itself to tackle the next.

The reference to phases is somewhat inaccurate, as OCBA's efforts to improve its emergency response are by no means sequential, but largely parallel, continuous, interconnected, and fluid streams. Much of what is categorized as phase two has long started. However, the analogy to phases may be helpful to conceptualize the findings of the review and consider them in the context of high-level organizational priority-setting.

Phase one refers to the development of the vision and the first steps of its implementation: articulation of the vision, organizational buy-in, re-direction of operational focus, creation of capacities to reach the people OCBA wants to assist. In other words, it concerns the what: What is the main priority? – to assist those worst off in the worst and most difficult to reach places.

This has largely been achieved. Organizational support for the emergency response ambitions is strong, response to emergencies and armed conflict at the heart of the operational portfolio, and OCBA's ability to gain access to those most difficult to access at least on par with the other OC's.

Phase two prioritizes the how: How will this be most effectively achieved? This encompasses the further advancement of organizational capacities to increase OCBA's relevance for those the organization seeks to assist. The reasons for prioritizing the how is the long list of mainly quality-related issues the organization perceives warrant prioritization.

To achieve this, it is recommended to identify the key organizational, transversal priorities, and develop a clear, holistic vision that ensures a collective focus under the leadership of senior management.

This review was not sufficiently comprehensive to issue an assertive recommendation as to what exactly these priorities should be. However, a few topics emerged during the review that may be taken into consideration:

**Human Resources as a collective priority**. Human resource capacities are pre-requisite to many of the identified challenges and improvement needs, and should therefore be 'top seed' in the ranking of organizational priorities. As already elaborated on above, it is essential to address the human resource challenges in a transversal and holistic manner. In particular, a strong partnership and co-ownership concerning mutual expectation and alignment of priorities between the HR department and Operations is key to success.

Stretching capacities to its limits is inherent to humanitarian action. When overwhelmed with acute needs, squeezing the last drop out of the available resources becomes a moral responsibility. At the same time, responsible human resource management needs to ensure that staff does not get unnecessarily frustrated and burnt out when operational commitments cannot be met for lack of resources, and/or staff are given positions of responsibility they are not equipped for. Managing the tension between these two competing priorities is a joint responsibility and requires steering from the top.

**The place of Emergency Response in the organization**. Does the transversal nature of emergency response warrant increased dedicated senior management attention? Should emergency support become a specific transversal dossier led by senior management? Is the place and scope of authority and influence of the Emergency Unit aligned with its role as the main vehicle of the core organizational priority? Can emergency response support needs and departmental priorities and processes be further optimized?

Exploring these questions starting from a support needs perspective rather than from a perspective of what is in place already, may help to identify innovative approaches not obvious when thinking 'inside the box'.

Closely linked to above are **standards, processes, and systems** – when the exception becomes the norm. Beyond the departmental efforts to design emergency-tailored processes and standards – HR, supply, resource decisions, and finance in particular – OCBA may wish to explore whether the framework of 'regular' vs. 'emergency' is the most appropriate, when emergency response and other interventions with short plannability horizons (volatile conflicts) become the organizational priority.

Reviewing what proportion of interventions requires rapid and tailored response in terms of start-up and support may provide a basis for optimizing and streamlining inter-, and intra departmental work-flows.

**Optimization of strategic governance and steering**. The review did not identify this as a topic that requires fixing, or should otherwise absolutely be an organizational priority. However, the questions articulated around the place of emergency response in the organization, as well as the issues raised in relation to the functioning and effectiveness of the OCT and Core MT, highlight governance as a potential area for improvement.


## ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

Although somewhat out of scope of the ToR, the reviewer would like to offer some additional observations:

Comparative advantage: Whilst – or perhaps because – overall emergency response in the major humanitarian crises is often inadequate, these contexts tend to attract multiple MSF OC's. The presence of multiple sections often carries benefits beyond the increased volume of operations. However, multi-sectional presence can also lead to unhelpful competition, duplication of efforts, and other inefficiencies. In the context of increasing interdependence within the movement, comparative advantages (specific OC expertise) may gain in importance over time. Emergency response could be one such area of expertise for OCBA to focus on.

De-centralization: Gradual centralization of decision-making to HQ has long been identified as an unintended and unwelcome trend in the majority of OC's. It may be too early to assess the impact of OCBA's decentralization initiatives – desks in Amman and Nairobi, Dakar hub, and the 'Latin America model' – but it will be valuable to ensure capitalization from these efforts also from the emergency response perspective.

The risk of cohesion: Internal cohesion regarding the centrality of emergency response is strong. Although it is undoubtedly an asset that enables common focus and vision, it is important to be conscious, and mitigate the risks, of its potential flipside – little space for the voice of dissent and critique. Ensuring room for internal challenge and diversity of opinion is vital to articulate and shape arguments and organizational choices.

# CONCLUSIONS

A review of OCBA's emergency interventions and support capacity needs to consider the larger context of organizational and operational developments in this period. Not only was armed conflict and emergency response placed in the heart of OCBA's operational policy, but it was also accompanied by substantial overall growth of operations. Thus, emergency interventions and operations in volatile contexts did not only increase proportionally, but also in absolute terms. This is an important aspect to bear in mind when assessing OCBA's emergency interventions and organizational support capacity in this period.

With regular missions having taken on more responsibility for emergency response in their own contexts, the Emergency Unit has made most of its capacity to fully focus on the major humanitarian emergencies. OCBA's presence and scale of operations in most of these crises are evidence of the organization's improved emergency response capacity.

To further improve this capacity, **it is worth examining whether the centrality of emergency response, and the EU as its main vehicle, is adequately reflected in its place in the organization.**

The MERTs are the other main vehicle for the organization's emergency response. Their establishment in six missions has improved the missions' emergency response capacities, their access in assertive states, and have helped to shift the operational focus to armed conflict and emergencies. Many aspects of the MERTs' functioning and roles require clarification and improvement, but there is broad consensus that the MERTs form an integral part of OCBA's emergency response capacity.

The main bottleneck that holds back both the EU and the missions with MERTs to further increase and improve their emergency interventions, is the scarcity of international staff with emergency coordination experience. This also contributes to a sense of competition between the EU and the MERTs.

A number of HR initiatives are underway to help ease the gap between demand and supply, but have not been able to keep up with the increasing demand for experienced staff as a result of the operational choices and growth. **To effectively tackle the human resource challenges, OCBA should make HR an organizational priority and collective (cross-departmental) responsibility.**

Overall, Service Department support to emergency response – after needing some time to adjust its priorities and support capacities to the shift in operational focus and support requirements – is continuously improving. To further improve their support capacity for emergency response, **Service Departments should assess where they can enhance cross-departmental coordination and joint priority-setting to tackle the many areas that were identified to be in need for improvements.**

On organizational level – in addition to reviewing the place of the EU in the organization, and the human resource priority – two other topics emerged as potential strategic priorities. One is linked to the question of the EU's place in the organization: Whilst the Emergency Committee is highly valued for its role in enabling emergency response, ambiguities exist around the purpose and functioning of the OCT and Core MT. **A review of the governance with the aim to optimize steering and support to emergency response may therefore be desirable.**

The other concerns standards and processes – the nuts and bolts of organizational support. The proportion of interventions with short planning horizons and need for tailor-made support, raises the question **whether the distinction and application of 'regular' and 'emergency' processes remains the most suitable system to provide optimal support.**

**Finally, the importance of the culture of delegated responsibility – creating an atmosphere in which staff feel confident to take initiative and risk – should not be underestimated.** Promoting this culture, and exploring if and how the emergency mind-set should be enhanced, will further benefit the organization's emergency response ambitions.

OCBA has made significant achievements in emergency response over the past years. The organization reaches more people in the heart of emergencies, and is present in more complex contexts. The strategic choice whom to assist is achieved. The strategic choice the organization is facing now, is how to most effectively improve the organization's capacity to make its assistance more relevant.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

### Organizational strategy

1. Elevate human resources to a key organizational priority. Ensure collective ownership and responsibility, and a strong partnership concerning mutual expectation and alignment of priorities between the HR department and Operations.
2. Base HR strategies (recruitment, retention, development, etc.) on projections of future needs (numbers and profiles).
3. Review whether the centrality of emergency response, and the EU as its main vehicle, is adequately reflected in its place in the organization.
4. Review and optimization of OCT and Core MT effectiveness as considered necessary.
5. Analyze whether support processes meet current and future field support needs as a basis for optimizing and streamlining inter-, and intra departmental work-flows.

### Organizational culture

6. Explore the topic of emergency mindset in internal debates, and act accordingly
7. Safeguard and promote a culture of delegated responsibility and (operational) risk-taking

### Tactical and operational level

8. MERTs:

    a. Examine and better define as required MSF's and MERTs' role in protracted conflicts beyond responding to individual emergencies (i.e. in advocacy, positioning, and programming)
    b. Examine and better define as required the scope of the individual MERTs (emergency preparedness, capacity and size, intervention criteria)
    c. Assess the balance between structural and intervention costs, and the risk of structural costs in terms of intervention choices?
    d. Define and develop priority tools required to enable effective interventions and monitoring
    e. Ensure capitalization and cross-fertilization of lessons learnt, in particular from innovative approaches

9. Consider defining the term 'emergency' (for internal use) to avoid the risk of different interpretation (context vs. management mode)
10. Improve cross-departmental prioritization and coordination in relation to enhancing implementation and support capacity for emergency response

# ANNEXES

# TERMS OF REFERENCE

# REVIEW OF

# MSF-OCBA EMERGENCY RESPONSE

# 2014-2016

This is the final version. Adaptations to version 3 were made based on an inception report and subsequent discussion between review owner and review team.

## BACKGROUND

In its Strategic Plan 2014 – 2017, MSF-OCBA committed to having the bulk of the portfolio dedicated to protracted conflicts, acute conflicts and emergency response (defined internally as "core"). Benchmarks were set: 85% of operational expenditure dedicated to "core" and 25-30% dedicated to emergency interventions. By the end of 2016, 89% of the operational budget is spent on core interventions (aggregated conflict + emergencies) and 33 % on emergencies (of which 80% was in situations of armed conflict). In July 2017, the Strategic Plan has been extended placing additional emphasis on improving emergency response.

While in terms of operational spending, the strategic plan objectives are clearly reached, the heightened focus on difficult contexts and emergencies has also required the adjustment of all Service Departments.

MSF-OCBA intended to examine the factors that have enabled the organization to meet its emergency objectives, as well as identify the organizational weaknesses related to emergency response, and this so as to feed both internal OCBA strategic discussions as well as to stimulate debate within MSF regarding broader ambitions and challenges for emergency response.

Additionally, the Emergency Gap Project has produced in depth analysis on the broader system's shortcomings regarding emergency response in conflict settings. To complete the analysis, relevant findings and conclusions of this review will be incorporated in E-gap messaging.

## OVERALL OBJECTIVE

To provide recommendations as to which topics and questions OCBA should consider for further improvement of its emergency response capacity on strategic organizational level.

 Specifically, the review will provide analysis on:

    a. Emergency Unit-led: OCBA's response to the biggest humanitarian crises within the period

Did OCBA do well in emergency response?

        o Did OCBA respond to the major humanitarian crises?

- o Was its response timely?
- o Did it address critical needs?
- o Was the response at scale?

b. What are the (organizational) enablers and obstacles for effective emergency response capacity?

c. Mission-led: OCBA's response to emergencies in regular missions
   - o What has enabled effective emergency response on mission level? Incl:
     - o Timeliness (speed)
     - o Capacity to gain access + manage security
     - o Capacity to adapt operational strategy
     - o Capacity to define operational vision
     - o Capacity to deploy (people and logistics)
     - o Capacity to effectively advocate and communicate
     - o For regular missions (detection of emergencies and capacity to scale up)

d. Allocation of resources and prioritization across the ops portfolio

**PERIOD REVIEWED**:             2014 – 2016

**RESPONSIBILITIES**

- o Review commissioned by Head of ARHP OCBA
- o Review managed by Evaluation Unit MSF-Sweden
- o Review team: two persons (lead + data analysis)

**METHODOLOGY:**

- Interviews with key stakeholders and cross-section of the organization
- Data analysis (ops, resources, HIS
- Review of relevant documentation (policies, evaluations, meeting minutes, etc.)

**LIMITATIONS**

- Documentation in parts somewhat sketchy (i.e. project and mission reports)
- Multi-OC presence impacts response, positioning, and advocacy and comms of the individual OC's. The intra-OC dynamics impacting the emergency response in the major (EU-led) interventions is not analyzed beyond the perceptions of the head of the E-desks.

**OUTPUT**

- o Report of approx. 20 pages
- o Presentation to relevant OCBA platforms

**DEADLINE**

- o Preliminary analysis and findings submitted by Sep 22nd (in time for Med-Ops in Oct)
- o Final report and presentation Oct 2017

## METHODOLOGY

1. Key informants
   - The owner of the review has identified 48 informants.
   - The informants include a wide cross-section of functions, including: HQ executive director, operations, support departments; senior field and UE pool staff; associative board members; other OCs, HART.
   - Interviews are conducted by skype
   - Interviews are semi-structured, and specific function-based questions and topics are developed prior to interviews.
   - See Annex for interview list

2. Data analysis
   - Isabel Lopez, assistant to the Operations Department, is responsible for compilation and analysis of recorded data (facts & figures, decisions).
   - An initial overview and analysis of data on meta-level has been done (ops portfolio: composition, emergency vs. regular in financial, HR, medical output)
   - See Annex for matrix on data collection for major emergency interventions

3. Document review
   - The list of documents to be reviewed is still evolving
   - See Annex for current list

4. Risks and limitations
   - It is unlikely that all informants will be available for interviews.
   - Although the choice of focusing on violence and emergency response is not being reviewed, there is a small survivor-bias. A small number of key staff left or were replaced when the new strategic direction was introduced. Those present today are largely very supportive of the strategic direction and may therefore be less critical about its fall-out, unintended consequences, and weaknesses.

## TIMEFRAME

|  | Days | Remarks | Deadline |
|---|---|---|---|
| Interviews | 7 | 51 interviews x 1 hr + scheduling | Sep 10 |
| Compile interviews | 2 |  | Sep 10 |
| Document review | 3 |  | Aug 30 |
| Data analysis | 1 | + Isabel's time who's doing most of it | Sep 10 |
| Analysis | 3 | The actual thinking/conceptualizing | Sep 10 |
| Misc | 1 | Calls Boris, Monica, Isabel, inception report, etc |  |
| Draft report | 3 |  | Sep 22 |
| Final report | 2 |  | Oct 26 |
| Total Pete | 22 |  |  |

# OCBA EMERGENCY RESPONSE REVIEW

# INCEPTION REPORT

Purpose of this document is to reflect on scope and feasibility of the initial ToR, summarize the initial findings, and lay out options to further direct the project to ensure it adds value and meets OCBA's expectations.

# 1.      PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Initially, the project was conceived as an evaluation, examining the questions whether and how OCBA has achieved its SP objectives with regard to emergency response ('Did we do well in emergency response?')

Based on further reflection on the ToR, an initial data analysis, and roughly a dozen interviews conducted so far, including with key stakeholders from senior management, the reviewers' preliminary thoughts are:

1. This project – unlike initially conceived – does not strictly meet the requirements of an evaluation. To make sound, assertive judgments and statements on the questions would require a/ a significant amount of research time, and b/ a methodology of qualitative data collection and analysis for which I do not possess the necessary skills.
2. The reviewer also does not believe such in-depth, rigorous evaluation would pass the cost-benefit hurdle. OCBA does not appear to have significant blind- sides, internal differences, or diverging analysis as to organizational weaknesses. Admittedly, this view is based on interviews from a limited cross-section (Ops, GD, HR).
3. For the main UE-led emergency interventions, a review of existing data (existing Fin, HR, medical data, recorded decisions - see Annex 5) and interviews with selected key staff can provide an overview of OCBA's responses in major crises, and identify potential common thematic issues, but not provide conclusive judgments as to the intervention's relevance and adequacy.
4. Senior management have expressed their expectations of this review to be forward-looking: to provide recommendations as to which topics and questions OCBA should consider for further improvement of its emergency response capacity (on strategic organizational level).
5. After discussion with the SEU, the reviewer advises against external publication or sharing of the report for two reasons:
    a. As a result of point 1, findings would not withstand (hostile) external scrutiny, and would thus be easy to dismiss. The review concerns internal management, and does not provide sufficiently solid data or evidence wrt relevance and impact of individual interventions.
    b. The review is so internal that it is likely of little interest and relevance to externals.

    This does not mean that key findings cannot be shared in some form with interested interlocutors, but they are not suited for external publication.

Other findings, more content-, than scope related include:

6. Key enablers for achieving the SP emergency objective(s) include:
    a. Strong cohesion and clarity of vision among small group of key decision-makers
    b. Ability and persistence to promote, explain, and defend vision over time
    c. Buy-in by large parts of the organization (readiness for change)
    d. Willingness to follow through on strategic choices with difficult decisions (project closure, replacement of staff in key functions)
    e. Institutional willingness to accept risk, coupled with resilience-building (Somalia kidnap)

f.  Promotion of a culture of trust, delegated responsibility, 'freedom to fail' (enabled by strong cohesion among key line managers)

7.  Interviewees have mentioned several weaknesses and areas of improvement, but so far, the only one listed consistently is HR.

8.  The phenomenon that today the UE mostly manages regular missions (whole missions, long-term, slow-moving in terms of access and ops), and regular missions are carrying out the 'classic old' emergencies (short-term, outbreaks, etc) has crystallized out of the interviews. I am as yet uncertain to what extent this warrants further analysis wrt implications for organizational capacity and strategy.

# 2.    PROPOSED ADAPTATION OF TOR

Based on above, in terms of the focus and scope of the ToR, I suggest a couple of deviations:

- The initial over-arching question at the core of the ToR is: Did OCBA do well in emergency response? My suggestion is to change this to: How can OCBA further improve its emergency response capacity? This may not appear to be a significant change, but it represents a shift in focus from looking back-wards to looking forwards.

- ToR point a): remains relevant (a meta-review of major humanitarian crisis interventions (UE-led ops in Ebola, Nigeria, S Sudan, Syria, Yemen).

- b): slight adaptation of phrasing to

Mission-led: OCBA's response to emergencies in regular missions: What has enabled effective emergency response on mission level? Where do they function effectively and why? Incl:
  o  Timeliness (speed)
  o  Capacity to gain access + manage security
  o  Capacity to adapt operational strategy
  o  Capacity to define operational vision
  o  Capacity to deploy (people and logistics)
  o  Capacity to effectively advocate and communicate
  o  Capacity to detect emergencies and to scale up

Several other themes are potentially interesting to explore further:

- Organizational set-up and support for emergency response:
  o  Are HQ departments able to provide adequate emergency response support? Do support systems and capacities reflect the operational balance regular vs. emergency?
  o  Verify assumption of changing nature of UE-led interventions (whole missions vs single projects, high security contexts, long-term management and strategies vs. in-and-out short-term stuff), and analyze whether this may warrant structural or system changes at HQ level? (see point 8)
  o  Analysis of operational decision-making (key platforms)

## ANNEX III: INFORMATION SOURCES

### Interviews

38 semi-structured interviews were carried out with:

- 30 HQ staff (BCN, Amman, NBO)
- 4 OCBA field staff
- Head of Emergency Team from 2 other OC's
- 2 HART members

On request of some interviewees, the list of interviewees is kept confidential.

### Documents reviewed:

OCBA Strategic Plan 2014-17

OCBA Strategic Plan extension 2017-19

OCBA Evaluation Strategic Plan 2008-12

OCBA Executive Governance Findings and Proposals 2014

ToR Emergency Committee

Emergency Committee Workflow

ToR Security Core Group

International Typology 2016

OCBA Annual Reviews 2014, 2015, 2016

OCBA Midyear Review 2017

OCBA Annual Security Reports 2014, 2015, 2016

OCBA Operational and Transversal Orientations for 2017 Planning

Intersectional Review Emergency Response to Typhoon Haiyan

RTE OCBA Emergency Response Upper Nile South Sudan (2014)

Mid-term Evaluation North Darfur Emergency Response Project 2015

OCBA Ebola Response Workshop report 2015

Emergency Gap Reports

MSF Response to Al Quds Hospital Attack 2016

OCBA Internal Report on Razeh Attack

Malakal Investigation POC Attack – Internal

Aleppo Crisis Response Analysis Preliminary Findings

Aleppo Syria – Medical Aid besieged, 2015

MCUF Aleppo OCBA Final Internal Report

Country Policies: CAR, DRC, Nigeria, Syria

2016 Rapport Annuel EURECA

CAR EPP Visit Report 2017

HIC Short Review (04-16)

Finance Department Annual Planning 2017

MSF International End of Mission Survey 2016 OCBA results

MSF International End of Mission Survey 2016 Global results

OCBA Emergency Response Performance Assessment

Survey on the OCBA Emergency Pool 2017

OCBA Supply Guidelines Policies and Procedures

### Data Analysis

Data analysed for this report was compiled in four different documents. They are available on request.

Big Crisis Typology

Highly Insecure Contexts

Emergency Response Evaluation Data

OCBA Data Analysis

Stockholm Evaluation Unit

Médecins Sans Frontières

www.evaluation.msf.org